



European journal of American studies Reviews 2014-1

Matthew Pustz, ed. *Comic Books and American Cultural History: An Anthology*.

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/10255>

DOI: 10.4000/ejas.10255

ISSN: 1991-9336

Publisher

European Association for American Studies

Electronic reference

Katerina Marazi, « Matthew Pustz, ed. *Comic Books and American Cultural History: An Anthology*. », *European journal of American studies* [Online], Reviews 2014-1, document 3, Online since 17 February 2014, connection on 19 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/10255> ; DOI : 10.4000/ejas.10255

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London and New York: Continuum International Publishing, 2012. ISBN: 978-1-4411-7262-4 pp. 275.

- 1 Comic books have always been considered a sensitive, and perhaps misunderstood, area for academia. Fortunately, they have come a long way since the attacks of Dr. Frederic Wertham and his *The Seduction of the Innocent* (1954) where they were considered to be the harbingers of negative influences.¹ Over the past years they have gained more recognition. University courses, including literary courses, media studies, game studies, adaptation studies, brand management courses, creative writing courses and even history courses, have been paying more attention to comic books which have much to offer by way of their narrative media form, their content, and characters in addition to being vital components of Popular Culture. It is encouraging to see academia being more open-minded about comic books, and as a sample of such open-mindedness, I credit the anthology *Comic Books and American Cultural History*.
- 2 *Comic Books and American Cultural History* is a diverse anthology of articles that examine and reflect how comic books and graphic novels can be used as resources for understanding the cultural history of the United States. As the back cover of the book informs us, “[o]ver the last twenty years, there has been a proliferation of book-length works focusing on the history of comic books, but few of those books have investigated how comics can be used as sources for doing American cultural history.” The multitude of works focusing on comic books and graphic novels from other perspectives includes, but is not restricted, to Scott McCloud’s *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (1993) which

examines the comic book medium and is possibly the most cited book in other works that have followed. M. Thomas Inge's *Comics as Culture* (1990) displays the importance of comics not only in American culture but in culture in general and offers interesting and insightful juxtapositions between comics and American language, Dada art, writer William Faulkner, artist Charlie Chaplin as well as connections with American industrial culture and publishing houses. *The Rise of the American Comics Artist: Creators and Contexts* (2010) focuses on an area relatively neglected which centers around the figure of the comic's creator emphasizing that the creator has been at the heart of any and all evolutions of the comic book medium and its genres. Finally, *Super/Heroes: From Hercules to Superman* (2007) is a compilation of articles that examine the figure of the superhero both diachronically and across cultures in a wider mythic context. Nevertheless, *Comic Books and American Cultural History: An Anthology* is unique not only in the information that it conveys but in its proposition of how to use comic books both by way of content and medium.

- 3 The book is divided into four parts that focus on "Doing Cultural History through Comic Books," "Comic Books as Cultural Artifacts," "Comic Books and Historical Identity" and "Comic Books and Contemporary History." The list of contributors ranges from Professors to PhD candidates and MA students from fields such as English and American Literature to Asian studies. The diversity of topics is noticeable, beginning from the Frontier Myth and extending to the events of 9/11. The articles discuss well-known comic book characters, such as Superman, as well as unfamiliar characters, such as Shang-Chi. Moreover, they demonstrate how the relation between the image and text are invaluable for the extraction of meaning either by working together or in opposition to each other. All contributions maintain a strong connection with American Cultural History, act as examples of how comic books and graphic novels can be employed for teaching and understanding American Cultural History and re-evaluate their standing as something more than entertainment.
- 4 The first section indicates the difficulty revolving around the status of comic books and how they can be conceived of as tools for teaching history. Jessamyn Neuhaus's "How Wonder Woman Helped My Students" offers an account of the advantages and disadvantages of employing comic books for methodological purposes even though the author notices that some students were resistant to the idea considering comic books to be "entertainment" and not "history" (17). Nevertheless, Neuhaus's attempts to implement comic books as primary sources for the purpose of teaching history had as their goal to use Pop Culture not as a means of consumption but as an area where critical, reflective thinking can emerge.
- 5 Bridget M. Marshall's article "Comics as Primary Sources: The Case of *Journey into Mohawk Country*" informs us that it was a common tactic among teachers to use comic books to attract readers only to turn their attention to "real" literature (27). Marshall, however, argues that "recent graphic novels actually do present remarkable historical detail, evidence and research, and are appropriate and useful as literary and historical texts in themselves" (27). Examples offered include Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1986), Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2004) and Joe Sacco's *Safe Area Gorazde: The War in Eastern Bosnia 1992-1995* (2005). Marshall emphasizes the advantages of the comic book medium's sequential art narrative where images and the written word, at other times work together to grant meaning and yet at other times work against each other thus requiring more

active interpretation, and suggests that they be seen as “visual footnotes” in juxtaposition to historical texts (28).

- 6 William Grady in his “Transcending the Frontier Myth: Dime Novel Narration and (Jesse) Custer’s Last Stand in *Preacher*” focuses on how the *Preacher* series’ (1995-2000) creator, Garth Ennis, takes on the role of a historian. In all literary fiction courses, the notions of realistic fiction and history are always problematic. What Grady highlights is the fact that a comic book or graphic novel can interweave elements of history, reality, myth and legend that not only reflect the creator’s ability to offer a subjective version that pertains to history but they also display how even products of popular culture have the ability to tell and show history.
- 7 With subjective versions in mind, the last, article of the first section is that of Alison Mandaville’s “‘DUEL. I’ll Give You DUEL’ Intimacy and History in Megan Kelso’s *Alexander Hamilton Trilogy*.” Mandaville examines how cartoonist Megan Kelso’s trilogy employs words and images “to re-imagine a more intimate and dynamic relationship between individuals and key events in the past than one might receive in either traditional works of history or primary literature” (59). Mandaville stresses how Kelso’s choice of medium facilitates the exploration of issues of history, nationality and identity and draws our attention to how the comic book form² helps in telling history, interpreting history but also how that form actually points to the multiple voices and versions of history.
- 8 The second section of this anthology is the largest in volume and explores how comic books can act as cultural artifacts and function as sources for teaching and research. Martin Lund’s article “American Golem: Reading America through Super-New Dealers and the ‘Melting Pot’” argues against a biographical approach to the examination of the DC Comics’ Superman character and in favor of a reading that expresses “the beliefs, values and norms offered up by the Roosevelt White House and the long-held theory of assimilation that painted the country as a great cultural ‘Melting-Pot’” (80). Although such a view seems refreshing by the end of his argument, Lund actually offers a merging of the two approaches (the biographical and the New Deal rhetoric) thus labeling the character as an American (in connection to the New Deal rhetoric) Golem (in connection to the biographical approach).
- 9 Jeanne Emerson Gardner’s “‘Dreams May End, But Love Never Does:’ Marriage and Materialism in American Romance Comics, 1947-1954” examines and confirms themes existing within the relatively neglected romance comics. While offering a plethora of summaries and commentaries, this article succeeds in showing how even romance comics, when read “against the grain” have a lot more meaning to offer towards topics such as post-war society, gender roles, domestic-gendered consumption than conventional readings would have us believe.
- 10 John Donovan’s “Parody and Propaganda: Fighting American and the Battle against Crime and Communism in the 1950s” brings us to the Cold War context, where creators Joe Simon and Jack Kirby set out to create the “first commie-basher [character] in comics” (110). Donovan draws our attention to the different historical periods and the circumstances under which creators were producing their work, not cut off from history and culture but as part of it. This, as a result, led to different techniques and aesthetics within storylines and in the creation of characters but it also offered implicit critique about the historical context of the time showing that even something that is initially considered to be simply entertaining can have more to say about an issue both via its content and its aesthetics.

- 11 The search for identity is a prevalent topic in Peter Lee's "Grasping for Identity: The Hands of Shang-Chi, Master of Kung Fu." Lee's article demonstrates how focus is placed not so much on the physical aspect of the kung-fu master but on philosophical concerns in light of the main character's, Shang-Chi, violent quest for identity which actually "became a metaphor for the ethnic consciousness of various minorities and especially Asian-Americans during the 1970s period" (122). He also signals the importance of the color scheme³ employed in comic book panels and the significance of color choices and their associations in connection to stereotypical or ethnic visual representations. Lee examines the inner battle amongst two different ethnic identities and depicts the associations and meanings this inner battle creates with the actual outcome of the story, where Shang-Chi essentially "finds his identity alone" (132).
- 12 Crisis of identity and "crisis of confidence" during the 1970's in American mainstream superheroes is the topic of Matthew Pustz's "Paralysis and Stagnation and Drift: America's Malaise as Demonstrated in the Comic Books of the 1970s." By employing a New Historicist approach to contemplate the changes in character behavior and plotlines of mainstream American superheroes such as, Superman, Spider Man, and many more, Pustz's article reveals how even mainstream American comic books mirrored the social, political and cultural reality of the 1970's by having superheroes abandon their costumed identities, suffer from lack of direction, face overwhelming power, problems, and threats that seemed impossible to overcome, or ultimately lose their super powers (138). Disguised behind the aspect of super-ness, these themes offer what Pustz believes is an insight to "how the malaise was resolved in the real world" as well (148).
- 13 Matthew J. Costello's article argues that "The Shopping Malls of Empire: Cultural Fragmentation, the New Media, and Consumerism in Howard Chaykin's *American Flagg!*" depicts the prominent themes of the 1980's such as new materialism, urban violence, income inequality, retreat into privacy, new media, shopping mall culture, and the blending of politics, celebrities and entertainment. In addition, Costello argues that the form of the comic book represents via "cascades of bright visuals," overlapping panels, bleeding action, sound effects, and a single image cutting across multiple panels, the decentered, fragmented, incoherent and even multicultural aspects of the 1980's and postmodernism.
- 14 The notion of identity poses as the prominent connecting theme of the third section. Todd Munson's "Transformers and Monkey Kings: Gene Yang's *American Born Chinese* and the Quest for Identity," offers an account of a graphic novel published in 2006. Similarly to Peter Lee's article, here Munson discusses the minority experience in *American Born Chinese* as well as the internal and external pressures that affect it (171). The article deconstructs the main character of the graphic novel, Chin-Kee, who, as Munson observes "is an overdetermined symbol of American-defined Chineseness, incorporating virtually every one of [the] stereotypical images" Americans have appointed to the Chinese which are the 'pollutant,' the 'coolie,' the 'deviant,' the 'Yellow Peril,' the 'model minority,' and the 'gook' (175-76). As a counterpart to Chin-Kee, the author of the graphic novel introduces Jin Wang who manages to "negotiate an identity that harmonizes both cultures [American and Chinese]" thus alleviating the choice between an American-born identity or a Chinese identity (181).
- 15 In "Agent of Change: The Evolution and Enculturation of Nick Fury," Phillip G. Payne and Paul J. Spaeth place emphasis on the Nick Fury character, as "an agent of change," who is influenced and shaped by cultural contexts such as World War 2 (Golden Age), the Cold

War (Silver Age)⁴ and even the War on Terrorism whilst simultaneously offering continuity to narrative plot lines and even characters such as Captain America. Changes have also been brought about by other creators and even film adaptations. While Payne and Spaeth draw attention to the importance of and changes this character has undergone by highlighting the cultural contexts that shaped the character, they leave us to ponder the character's status as an "agent of nothing" in a war on terrorism context.

- 16 Ben Bolling's "The U.S. HIV/AIDS Crisis and the Negotiation of Queer Identity in Superhero Comics, or, Is Northstar Still a Fairy?" argues that the outbreak narrative, the Patient Zero containment fantasy and the gay-redeemer narrative have merged alongside a queer reading⁵ of comic book superhero Northstar. Bolling stresses the importance of how these narratives of disease actually "shape cultural responses to illness" and in the case of the Northstar character this merging and development of plot lines are considered to be "progressive strides in the movement to normalize the depiction of queer characters in mainstream superhero comics" (215). While he highlights the comic book's capability to delve into serious subject matter, he emphasizes that in all cases of disease narratives what ought to be addressed is the effect these characters and narratives are created to have as well as how they ultimately shape our responses to such issues.
- 17 The fourth, and final, section of this anthology connects comics with contemporary American history, displaying that they are influenced by their current cultural context and capable of commentary. A. David Lewis's article "The Militarism of American Superheroes after 9/11" examines the resurgence of the war genre and the issue of warfare following the 9/11 attacks. From 2002 a number of mainstream titles began to emerge, which were infiltrated with militancy, and brought into focus as well as questioned themes such as authority, abuse of power, the meaning of terrorism and the sense of historicity (225). What it is telling of Lewis's article is his final contemplation on whether these warfare storylines, infused with militancy, thus emanating the themes and questions that they do, would actually exist if there were no relative context.
- 18 Yves Davo's "September 11, 2001: Witnessing History, Demythifying the Story in *American Widow*" focuses on a non-fictional graphic memoir published in 2008. This autographic narrative recounts the experience of Alissa Torres as a pregnant widow of the September 11, 2001 attacks whose personal experience renders the narrative an autobiography of trauma that depicts her intimate feelings and memories. Davo argues that the choice of medium⁶ with its overabundance of dialogue balloons in addition to their shapes, the multiplication of languages, different typographical choices and the colors (simple black, white, and light blue) comment on the overexposure of the event in general. Similarly to Costello's article, Davo highlights the mechanics of the comic book medium and their ability to offer some commentary and meaning both to a serious event as well as abstract notions such as memory, myth and reality thus alluding to their importance within the realm of culture as well as literature.
- 19 Finally, in "'The Great Machine Doesn't Wear a Cape!': American Cultural Anxiety and the Post-9/11 Superhero" Jeff Geers rightfully states that "[o]n September 11th, the American superhero failed" (250). The character Great Machine of Brian K. Vaughan's *Ex Machina* series, poses as the new mythos that will offer a reevaluation of heroes and superheroes in addition to issues pertaining to the ideologies that were shaken due to 9/11. Geers introduces us to a post-9/11 re-evaluation of a new hero capable of living in and repairing a traumatized culture from whence classical superheroes may take point. The survival of

the classical superhero and the emergence of a new type display the survival of the U.S. after 9/11 but also hint at the operations and ideological re-evaluations necessary for repairing and rebuilding a traumatized nation.

- 20 The anthology essentially offers a cohesive and coherent albeit diverse and broad range of interesting topics that brilliantly exhibit the importance of Comic Books in connection to American Cultural History. The articles introduce new authors, creators, comic book and graphic novel titles with plenty of details; they manage to sustain the importance of the topics of the titles they have chosen in addition to the importance of the comic book and graphic novel medium. The writers of the anthology live up to their promise by offering indications of how comic books can be employed for teaching purposes, in addition to offering insight and information about American Cultural History. This book poses as an additional voice within a vast dialogue concerned with American culture and proves to be a vital component for relative research which reflects how the comic book and graphic novel are indeed more than entertainment.

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NOTES

1. See Stephen Krensky's *Comic Book Century: The History of American Comic Books* (2008)
2. See Scott McCloud's "Blood in the Gutter" (60-93) in *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (1994).
3. See Scott McCloud's "A Word about Color" (185-192) in *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (1994).
4. See Chris Ryall and Scott Tipton's *Comic Books 101: The History, Methods and Madness* (2008).

5. Will Brooker in “Batman: One Life, Many Faces” (185-198), found in *Adaptations: From Text to Screen, Screen to Text* (1999).
 6. See Ian Gordon’s “Making Comics Respectable: How Maus Helped Redefine a Medium” (179-193) and Andrew Loman’s “‘That Mouse’s Shadow’: The Canonization of Spiegelman’s Maus” (210-234) found in *The Rise of the American Comics Artist: Creators and Contexts* (2010).
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